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SOMA BROUGHT UP-TO-DATE*

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Already a decade has passed since the publication of the English edition of our *SOMA: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*. *SOMA* first made its bow to the world in an expensive *de luxe* format. That edition is exhausted and copies are quoted in the auction markets for rare books at a considerable advance in price. The hard cover edition is also exhausted. Of the paperback edition there has been a succession of printings. It sells steadily, especially in university centers of the English-speaking world.

When I undertook to study the Soma enigma, I approached it from outside the Sanskrit discipline, from ethnobotany. After all, if a plant is to be identified, why not turn to botany? And if the plant, when its juice was ingested, inspired its devotees with glowing rapture and adoration, why not have recourse to someone conversant with plant hallucinogens? The West has known the *R̥gVeda* for more than a century. The Vedists have failed to identify the Soma plant, if indeed they ever made any effort to do so: of such effort I have found no serious trace, however strange this may seem to non-Vedists.

Naturally I needed a Vedist to work with me. My first stroke of good fortune was to win the enthusiastic cooperation of a young and brilliant Sanskrit scholar, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, who holds doctorates in Sanskrit and Indian Studies from Harvard and Oxford Universities and

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who has lately become Professor of the History of Religions and Indian Studies at the University of Chicago. She is the author of Part II of our *SOMA*, 'The Post-Vedic History of the Soma Plant'.

My method was to study Louis Renou's translation of the ṚgVeda, as far as he had gone before his death, especially but by no means exclusively Mandala IX, as well as all his essays and commentary on the Vedic text. I also found richly rewarding (1) Abel Bergaigne's three volumes on *La Religion Védique*, packed full as they were with brilliant *aperçus*, even prophetic in some instances, although he never suspected that a mushroom could be the answer to the identity of Soma, and (2) *L'Agniṣṭoma* of W. Caland and V. Henry, in which they give a slow-motion picture, as it were, of the Soma sacrifice. There were giants in the land in those early days of Vedic studies. My transatlantic correspondence with Dr. O'Flaherty was voluminous, as we constantly exchanged ideas and I raised questions with her.

Early in my inquiries it seemed to me that a mushroom was the answer to many passages in the Vedic text and was contradicted by none. I went over the ground again and again and explored further and further. The result was that I accumulated many texts, each supporting my mushroom surmise, and I found none contradicting it. Not one of my passages could be considered proof — far from it — but the accumulation of many such passages would carry increasing conviction. Here is the technique of overlapping circles and ellipses, which is a commonplace in the natural sciences. To this day Darwin's theory of the Origin of Species has not been conclusively proved, but the accumulation of evidence in its favor has been overwhelming and convincing; no one of consequence challenges it. When we published our *SOMA* I waited with bated breath for fear a text from the ṚgVeda would be produced incompatible with our mushroom hypothesis: none has been offered. Instead, some Vedic and Sanskrit scholars have produced most helpful, even startling, support.

The beauty of our case is that our evidence is linked in *parallel* and not in *series*, and one or another of our separate arguments can be shot down and yet our overall conclusions will hold good.

Of primary interest to the readers of the French edition is the public reception that the book has had from leading scholars in the Sanskrit world, especially those competent in the R̥gVeda. This reception has been conspicuously marked by silence: so far as I know, there have been only three full-dress reviews by leading Vedic scholars, two unfavorable and one favorable. To each of the unfavorable reviews I have published a detailed reply.

But that silence extends only to the printed word. The discussions among Sanskritists and especially Vedic scholars were for a while lively. Beyond the confines of those limited disciplines, among botanists, anthropologists, indologists, sinologues, students of religion, etc., etc., the references to our mushroom surmise in lectures, discussions, and publications have been steady and, so far as I have knowledge, all laudatory. But these people are not Vedists.

For generations the Vedic and Sanskrit fraternities have been an ingrown community: the outside world of scholarship and science has largely left them to themselves to till their rich gardens in peace, and in turn they have largely ignored that world. I hear tell of fratricidal infighting in the Sanskrit family, but however that may be, they are unaccustomed to invasion from the outside and many do not welcome intruders: they close their ranks when the watchman cries 'Stranger!' In Vedic time the Brahmans were the exclusive custodians of the Secrets of Soma: today some of the Vedic scholars occupying exalted chairs seem to have replaced the Brahmans in their attitude of superior exclusivity, though of course these Vedic scholars are not possessed of the Secrets.

In *SOMA* a Vedist and ethnomycologist, working as a team, think we may have found the answer to the Soma enigma. As I shall show shortly, invaluable support for our position has been forthcoming from those scholars whose minds are open to new ideas.

There are problems in the humane letters as well as science

that do not lend themselves to final answers. In our *SOMA* we advanced with all modesty a thesis pointing to an identification of the Soma plant. We marshalled evidence favoring (not proving) this identification and hoped that the evidence was enough to interest specialists and to encourage them to look further.

When Darwin announced his theory of evolution, there were those Biblical scholars who took the position that if his theories challenged the literal truth of the Bible he must be wrong and the Bible was of course (so they said) right. External evidence on the Bible has revolutionized conceptions of it in the past century and the ṚgVeda is no more immune to detached study than the Bible. As compared with the theory of evolution, the controversy over Soma in the ṚgVeda is the same *en petit, en très petit*. There is a category of Indo-Iranian exegete who lives immured in his enclave, unfamiliar with the outside world. Fortunately not all Indo-Iranian scholars are of that breed. We must remember, however, that exegetes, useful — indeed indispensable — as they are, are often at the end of the line when it comes to assessing great poetry.

Some of the most rewarding years of my life I have spent under the spell of the line of seminal Vedic and Sanskrit scholars whom I have already mentioned: Bergaigne, and Caland and Henry, and Renou, as well as many other figures of comparable stature in the English-speaking world. That succession of learned and intuitive scholars seems, at least momentarily, to have fallen off somewhat, with Renou's tragic death and the death of the R.P. Jean de Menasce, O.P. My conversations with Renou in his Paris home and his country place in Normandy, the letter that Menasce wrote me from his death-bed, make me certain that had they lived, whether they agreed or disagreed with me, the breadth of their understanding would have been inspiring, their pronouncements discriminating and helpful. They would have grasped the possibilities that lay in interdisciplinary exchanges — long overdue — for Vedic studies. No one could ever say that they possessed constipated mentalities.

FRESH EVIDENCE

A. THE PUTKA OF THE SANTAL

At an early stage of our mycological inquiries the late Georg Morgenstierne, the distinguished Norwegian scholar specializing in the babel of tongues spoken in Nuristan, drew my attention to an oddity of the language spoken by the Santal, a tribe numbering some millions living in scattered villages of Orissa and Bihar in India. Their language is neither Indo-European nor Dravidian: in India it heads a third much smaller family called Munda. A trait of these languages is that they possess no genders: Munda speakers know not our masculine, feminine, neuter categories. For them all creatures and objects are either animate, possessing a soul, or inanimate, devoid of soul. The division between the two seems to us somewhat arbitrary, enshrining conceptions that prevailed long long ago. Thus the sun, moon, stars were and are conceived of as animate. On the other hand the whole of the vegetable kingdom is inanimate — with one exception, *a single species of mushroom* called 'putka'*. What was this mushroom and why was it animate?

In 1965 I visited the Santal Parganas (as they are called) in Bihar, in and around Dumka. I questioned as many of the older people as I could. Mrs. A.E. Stronstad, the wife of the Norwegian missionary, most graciously was serving as my interpreter. I found the Santal an endearing people, gentle, eager to help, obviously candid. None of them that I spoke with knew either English or Hindi. The Santal are, unlike the Hindus, mycophiles. My best informant was an elderly woman, Ludgi Marndi. She told me there was one mushroom that caused inebriation. Was it the *putka*? No, definitely not. What was the *putka*? We were in January and none were around at that time of year. Why was it animate? No one knew: apparently the reason had been lost in the depths of the past. A few informants pointed out hesitatingly that *putka* abounded in the sacred grove of *sarjom* trees growing near every village. (Santal *sarjom* = Hindi *sal* = *Shorea robusta*) Was this perhaps the

* 'Mushroom' in French is *champignon*, but unlike 'mushroom' in English, *champignon* embraces the whole fungal world even to the microscopic species. As this paper was to be translated into French, 'mushroom' in it embraces ascomycetes as well as basidiomycetes.

reason? But the *sarjom* trees themselves were not animate, and *putka* grew abundantly elsewhere: how then could that be the reason? No answer.

Just as I was about to leave the Santal country I engaged Ludgi Marndi in one final talk. We went over the same ground. Suddenly she leaned forward and in a whisper made a most curious remark, which she said was her guess as to why the *putka* were animate: the *putka* must be eaten on the very day they are gathered, 'for within twenty-four hours they will stink like a cadaver'. She was whispering. She was so earnest that I wrote down in my journal at once what she had said. But I confess that it meant nothing to me.

In 1967 the mycologist Roger Heim, then directeur of the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle and former Président of the Académie des Sciences, and I, he from Paris and I from New York, journeyed to the Santal villages of Orissa and Bihar. We went in July. We found *putka* growing in abundance and Heim identified them. They were fungi without inebriating potency. The Santal gathered these hypogaeous fungi just as they were appearing on the surface, little dark-brown globular mushrooms. We questioned villagers along our whole route but no one could tell us why these mushrooms were animate. When we published our paper on our trip in *Les Cahiers du Pacifique* #14, in September 1970, we offered that baffling sentence of Ludgi's to our readers, though it still meant nothing to us.

It meant nothing to us until the April-June 1975 issue of the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (JAOS) came out. Then it developed that her remark meant everything to us. That JAOS paper explained 1) Ludgi's baffling remark, 2) why the *putka* were animate, 3) and the etymology of *putka*. It fortified even further, some say immeasurably, the thesis that we had presented in *SOMA: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*.

The paper in the JAOS was written by Stella Kramrisch. She has spent 27 years in India as Professor of Indian Art at the University of Calcutta. She also taught concurrently at the Courtauld Institute, London University. From there she had gone to the University of Pennsylvania as Professor of South Asian Art. She was and is now the Curator of Indian and Himalayan Art in the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Profes-

sor of Indian Art at the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University.

P.O. Bodding in the preface to his five volume *Santal Dictionary* (Oslo, 1929-1936, I:xiv) had drawn attention to a noteworthy fact:

Strangely enough, the Santals use some pure Sanskrit words, which, so far as I know, are not heard in present day Hindi.

He might have added that, at least in the instance we are considering, the word has disappeared from *all* Sanskrit vernaculars. Professor Kramrisch wins a rich accolade for discovering that Santal *putka* was a loan word from Sanskrit, *pūtika*, a plant heretofore unidentified. She had read our paper in the *Cahiers du Pacifique*, and saw immediately that *putka* was simply the Sanskrit *pūtika*. It is cognate with our word 'putrid', and the stench of the *putka* lives up to its Sanskrit name. The *pūtika* was mixed with the clay that went into the ceremonial making of the Māhāvīra pot. Its offensiveness was turned into fragrance when the pot, held by tongs, was fired in the course of the rite. It was the earliest surrogate for Soma. No one had ever known what plant it was. Not even Bodding had hit on its identity. In our *SOMA* Dr. O'Flaherty had mentioned *pūtika* four times but I failed to link it with the *putka*: Stella Kramrisch in the *JAOS* had identified it with finality. Professor Kramrisch wrote:

The identification of *Pūtika*, the Soma surrogate, supplies strong evidence that Soma indeed was a mushroom. *Pūtika* integrated into the Mahavira pot played its part in the mystery of the Pravargya sacrifice. That putka-mushrooms should be known, to this day, as 'endowed with a soul' witnesses amongst the Santal of Eastern India a memory of the numinous emanating from the indigenous Indian Soma substitute (Vol. 95:2, p. 230 col. 2)

A gap of more than two and a half millennia, a transfer from Aryan priestly symbolism to tribal belief, the tribe adopting a Sanskrit name with but little change into its own language, the survival of this name in a Munda language, in a region at a considerable distance to the east from the ancient center of Brahmanical sacrifices, all this did not impair the ongoing myth of *Pūtika*. This species is known to the Santal as 'endowed with a soul'. It is distinct from other mushrooms, from all the vegetable kingdom, as being numinous. The odor of sanctity clings to this

mushroom, however pejorative its telling name (p. 233 col. 2)

The mantle of King Soma had fallen on this notable mushroom, which inherits the glory of Soma for whom it is a surrogate. Its heyday is in the Pravargya ritual. Then the mushroom is lost to us in a millennial darkness from which, miraculously, it emerges 'endowed with a soul', amongst the aboriginal Santal of Eastern India in our own day. . . . (p. 235 col. 2)

How amazing it is that through a concatenation of happenstances we are able, here in 1978, to define the precise species of the plant *pūtika*, which the Aryans, perhaps 3000 years ago, adopted as a surrogate from Soma! Preserved as in a time capsule in the Santal country and called in the Santal language *putka*, for 3000 years it waited to be discovered and its meaning made known by Roger Heim, Directeur of the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, by the Austrian-born art historian, Stella Kramrisch, and by the ethnomycologist Gordon Wasson, two of us working as a team, Heim and Wasson seeking the reason why *putka*, alone in the vegetable kingdom, was animate and not finding the answer, not until Kramrisch revealed it to them, on the strength of evidence we had gathered but had failed to understand! According to the laws of Manu, mushrooms have been forbidden for thousands of years to Hindus of the twice-born castes. This makes it all the more significant that a mushroom was at one time the Holy of Holies.

The late R.C. Zaehner, a distinguished scholar in the Indo-Iranian field and a professor in Oxford, in his review of our *SOMA* in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 22-5-1969, gave as the main argument against my mushroom theory the fact that when Soma came to be abandoned other mushrooms were never the substitutes. He did not live long enough to learn that the primary surrogate, the *pūtika*, was a mushroom.

Manfred Mayrhofer in his *Concise Etymological Sanskrit Dictionary* presented two identical words that he spelled *pūtikah*: 1) 'foul, stinking', and 2) 'a species of plant serving as a substitute for the Soma plant'. Fortunately, in his 'Additions and Corrections' at the end of Vol 3, he was able to cite Professor Kramrisch's paper and thus reconcile and unite in one word what he had presented as homonyms.

B. THE COLOR OF SOMA.

We said in *SOMA* that *hári* in the R̥gVeda meant red when that color word was applied to Soma, which we think was *A. muscaria*, a mushroom that throughout Eurasia, when mature, is almost always an intense and striking red. John Brough says: 'I have been unable to find any evidence that any shade of red is included in the colour-range denoted by *hári*', and winds up his discussion by declaring that 'red is absolutely excluded'.

Scholars know that to arrive at the value of color words in texts 3000 and more years old calls for intense linguistic research, citation by citation, pinpointing as close as possible the time and place of each citation, and the study of other overlapping color words, and of cognate color words in surrounding languages, *etc.*, *etc.* In Brough's discussion of *hári* there is none of this, only his *ipse dixit*.

Sir Harold W. Bailey, Brough's predecessor in the chair in Cambridge that Brough now holds, undertook a study of the meaning of *ZAR*, cognate in Khotan Saka to Vedic *hári*. His findings appeared in a collection of learned papers: *Mémorial: Jean de Menasce*, published in 1974 as #185 by the Fondation Culturelle Iranienne. I will quote only one sentence of his conclusions:

Important for the Irano-Indian period is the corresponding Old Indian vocabulary. Here *hári*-, *harít*-, *hárita*- has the same wide range from red through orange to yellow and green. (p. 372)

Bailey mentions neither Brough nor me.

C. THE ETYMOLOGY OF 'SOMA'

'Soma' has been known in the West for almost two centuries and has been a focus of scholarly attention for most of that time. Yet Indic scholars including Brough have docilely accepted the 'etymology' that the Brahmans have given it and say that *so*- is the Vedic *su*-, meaning the 'pressed thing', from the liturgical act in the Soma sacrifice when the plants were noisily pounded with stones on hide-covered boards. As Bailey said in 1971 in Tokyo, this is 'a poor kind of way to designate a sacrificial plant of great potency'. Indeed, the plant must have

had a name before the liturgy was devised, but then we are to suppose that that name was utterly lost, and the plant came to have no name at all! Is this conceivable? But in the Brahman world etymologies were creatures of word-play, puns, poetic fancy.

Bailey has suggested an alternative etymology, which he has presented briefly in three publications, listed below. Instead of *so-ma-*, he would break the word thus: *som-a-* and then it would be linked with the Indo-European root for 'fungus', of which German *Schwamm*, Latin *fungus*, Greek *spongia* are just a few examples in Europe. Many Vedic and Sanskrit scholars display a low flash-point when this fungal theme is broached. Why this is so is baffling. It has been suggested to me that a spiritual osmosis from the Brahmans is the explanation, for converts are proverbially more Papist than the Pope. I prefer to think that as I was the first to suggest a mushroom, they may resent the irruption of an outsider into their domain. Let them be cautious: Bailey's suggestions have a way of turning out right in the end. After all, the Law of Parsimony has its place here: as between two unproved etymologies, the plausible one has an immense advantage over the one that strains credibility.

Bailey presented this etymology orally at Canberra, at the 28th International Congress of Orientalists in January 1971. He next developed the theme in the *Memoirs of the Research Department of Toyo Bunko (The Oriental Library)*, No. 29, Tokyo, in 1971, pp 8 and 15. He discussed it again in his paper, 'A Half-Century of Irano-Indian Studies', which he read as an informal lecture after he was awarded the Triennial Gold Medal of the Royal Asiatic Society on 13 April 1972 and which was published in the Society's *Journal* No 2, 1972, p 105. He returned to the theme in his contribution to *Mithraic Studies*, edited by John R. Hinnells and published by Manchester University Press in 1975, p 19, ftnt 38.

D. AJA EKA PAD

Through oversight I failed to include in our *SOMA* a discussion of *Aja Ekapād*, the designation of a deity mentioned six

times in the ṚgVeda, always in hymns to the Vi'svadevas. This name means, as Abel Bergaigne pointed out and everyone agrees, *non-né unipède* 'not-born singlefoot'. There has been much scholarship expended on this name for a god: the 'Not-born Singlefoot', but no one has seen how perfectly it fits a mushroom. A mushroom is *unipède*: to this day every German child still learns at his mother's knee the riddle:

.....
Sag' wer mag das Männlein sein
Das da steht auf einem Bein?

Children: Glückpilz! Fliegenpilz!

Less familiar to us urbanized westerners, living divorced the land and unfamiliar with the elementary facts of nature that our ancestors well knew, is *non-né*. All plants are born of seed, *except mushrooms*. They are *non-né*. The spores of a mushroom are too small for the eye to see: they require a microscope. Mushrooms were, as Early Man saw it, miraculously conceived, by the lightningbolt of the Almighty in mother earth softened by the rain. There is a verse in the ṚgVeda that says Parjanya, the god of Thunder, was the father of Soma, and according to another verse, 'the gods, those fathers with a commanding glance, laid the Somic germ'. In *Aja Ekapād* we have the perfect binomial for a mushroom!

Aja Ekapād is accompanied in five citations by another divinity, Ahi Budhnya, the serpent of the depths, a chthonic being who invariably guards the holy plant throughout Asia. That *Aja Ekapād* is another name for Soma, perhaps already archaic in Vedic times, finds support in ṚgVeda X 65.13, where the epithet proper to Soma, 'Mainstay of the Sky', is applied to him. In ṚgVeda X 82.6 *Aja* appears, not now linked to *Ekapād*, but to the navel, *nabni*, also endlessly applied to Soma, and thus two seemingly disparate metaphors are reconciled in the divine mushroom, both proper to Soma.

Here is Renou's translation of the second half of the verse we are discussing, X 82.6:

Dans le nombril du Non-né (est) fixé le Un (comme les rais sur la roue), en lequel tous les êtres se tiennent-depuis-toujours.

In the navel of the Not-born (is) fixed the One (like the spokes on the wheel), in which all beings stand from all time.

He has interpolated — clearly indicated by the parentheses — 'like the spokes on the wheels. Where did Renou get these words or the idea that they contain? Obviously he did not invent this gloss. Dr. O'Flaherty has sought the source in the obvious places and has not found it. Perhaps it occurs in the other Vedas or the Brahmanas. It might prove of vital interest, for the gills of a mushroom make one think of the spokes of a wheel; attached to the stipe as to the navel.

I will end this essay on a lighter note.

One aspect of our *SOMA* that was utterly repugnant even to my friends and supporters in Europe and America was my discussion of Soma-urine. Without exception they were horrified by the thought of drinking urine, and filled with disbelief. This surprised me as I had thought we in this generation had overcome our parochial squeamishness. In my *Rejoinder* to Brough I handled this topic with special care, citing contemporary evidence to indicate that urine drinking goes on to this day in India and I think in most of the world's population. Early Man, probably everywhere, recognized that in urine he possessed an aseptic fluid useful for wounds, serving also in religious observances, and perhaps wholesome for ingestion.

In the fall of 1977 Morarji Desai, Prime Minister of India, made known to the world that he drinks his own urine every day, for his health's sake. Little did the Prime Minister know how this innocent announcement would affect the post and the telephone calls of Gordon Wasson in Danbury, Connecticut. All sorts of people, friends and even strangers, got in touch with me to congratulate me. One Sanskrit scholar, a friend, said that now the last barrier to my Soma theory was demolished! Another man, engaged in the public relations business, a stranger who scarcely knew me, asked me how I had contrived such an interview. What a coup! Did I have a personal contact with the Prime Minister, or know someone who knew him? Alas, I could claim no credit.

WASSON'S SOMA: IMPORTANT REVIEWS AND PERTINENT COMMENTARY

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(2) 'Trends in Iranian Studies', *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko* (The Oriental Library) No. 29, Tokyo, The Toyo Bunko; see pp. 8 and 15.
(3) 'A Half-Century of Irano-Indian Studies', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1972:2, pp. 99-110; see p. 105.
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(2) 'Soma of the Rig Veda: what was it?', *JAOS*, 91:2, April-June 1971. This paper was republished later by the American Oriental Society in their Essay Series, No. 7, along with Daniel Ingalls's review that had appeared with it in the *JAOS*.
(3) 'Soma and the Fly-Agaric: Mr. Wasson's Rejoinder to Professor Brough', with Introduction by Richard Evans Schultes. Published by the Botanical Museum of Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. 1972.